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IDENTITY FORMATION AT ADOLESCENT STAGE

Identity Formation at Adolescent Stage

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Abstract: A successful identity formation is related to being psychologically well (Erikson, 1963). This link seems to be lost in the identity style literature that focuses either on the maturity of the identity styles, or on adaptive and maladaptive behaviour correlates of identity styles. In this study, we address this lost link. We administered the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1992a) and the scales of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff, 1989) to 230 Hellenic University students. The Hellenic translations of the scales functioned appropriately. The findings suggest that, first, avoiding facing identity issues is negatively related to psychological well-being, and, second, when such issues are faced, the way of facing them is not important.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescents face the task of forming an identity: They need to make up their minds on important issues in their lives, such as what profession to follow, in what religion to believe, or what political ideas to adopt. They may approach such issues in different ways. For instance, they may gather information and make decisions accordingly, or they may adopt the guidelines set forth by significant others. This study addresses whether the way of approaching identity issues is important for the well-being of individuals.

Identity, Identity Status, and Identity Styles Identity formation is the successful resolution of the so-called identity crisis, presented in Erikson's (1982) psychosocial theory. Erikson described development as a series of conflicts faced at different ages, which result from the interplay between the social environment and individual growth (Erikson, 1963). The success or failure of resolving each conflict affects the success of resolving future conflicts (this principle is known as the epigenetic principle). Successful resolution of the conflicts is related to the emergence and re-emergence of an increased sense of inner unity, and an increase of good judgement and of the capacity of doing well (Erikson, 1980).

As Erikson (1959) himself admitted, the content of identity has not been very specific in his theory. Therefore, different operationalisations have been suggested (e.g., Blasi & Milton, 1991; Van Hoof, 1998). From these, the identity status paradigm, introduced by Marcia (1966), proved to be the most famous and research inspiring one. Marcia (1966) described four "individual styles of coping" (p. 558) with the identity formation task, and called these identity statuses. Individuals are assigned to these statuses on the basis of the degrees to which they have explored or are exploring identity alternatives and to which they are committed to one of these

alternatives. Identity achievers and foreclosures are both committed: The former have firstly explored identity alternatives, while the latter have not done so. On the other hand, moratoriums and diffusions are not committed: The former are now in the process of exploring, while the latter have not explored identity alternatives. Extrapolating from Erikson's theory, we would expect identity achievement and foreclosure to be developmentally more favoured than moratorium and diffusion, because the former involve having made commitments. This is only partly true: In the identity status literature, identity achievement is a mature and diffusion an immature status (Meeus, ledema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999); moratorium, however, is considered more mature a status than foreclosure (Waterman, 1982). Therefore, it appears that, in the identity status paradigm, the interest is diverted from holding commitments to exploring identity alternatives.

Although exploration refers to the process of identity formation, the identity status paradigm itself is rather outcome-oriented. Acknowledging this, Berzonsky (1990) proposed the idea of identity styles to describe the social-cognitive strategies individuals use to face identity issues. An information orientation involves actively seeking out, elaborating, and evaluating relevant information in order to form commitments. A normative orientation involves a focus on the normative expectations held for the individuals by significant others. Finally, a diffuse/avoidant orientation refers to avoiding the confrontation of identity issues for the longest possible. Extensive research (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999; Berzonsky, 2002) has shown that identity achievers and moratoriums use mainly an information orientation, foreclosures a norm orientation, and diffusions a diffuse/avoidant orientation. In accordance with the aforementioned idea on the maturity of identity statuses, an information orientation is considered the maturest identity style, a diffuse/avoidant orientation

the least mature, and the norm orientation lies in between (Berzonsky, 1990).

IDENTITY STYLES AND WELL-BEING

As we mentioned before, Erikson inextricably related the developmentally desirable outcome of identity formation with one's good judgement, sense of inner unity, and capacity of doing well, what can be readily identified as characteristics of somebody being psychologically well. On the other hand, the theory behind identity styles refers to their maturity, but not to their outcomes in terms of being well. This gap is partly covered by several studies that addressed whether identity styles are differentially related to indices of well-being.

An information orientation is related positively to successful coping with stress and anxiety, to problem-focused coping, and to openness to experience, and negatively to other-directedness, to debilitating effects of anxiety, to reliance to wishful thinking, and to emotional distancing. On the other hand, a diffuse/avoidant orientation is related negatively to quality of peer relationships, to academic achievement, and to self-esteem, and positively to debilitating effects of anxiety, to emotional distancing, to other-directedness, to maladaptive decisional strategies, to drugs and alcohol problems, to depressive reactions (Nurmi, Berzonsky, Tammi, & Kinney, 1997), to neuroticism, and to eating and conduct disorders (for reviews, see Berzonsky, 1990, 2002, 2003).

While information orientation is clearly positively related to well-being and diffuse/avoidant orientation is clearly negatively related to well-being, the relationship of normative orientation and well-being is not clear-cut. Thus, similarly to information orientation, it is positively related to effective behaviours, while, similarly to diffuse/avoidant orientation, it is also positively related to emotional avoidance and to debilitating effects of anxiety (Berzonsky, 1992b). Lastly, unlike information orientation, it is negatively related to problem-focused coping and to openness regarding core areas of the self (Berzonsky, 1990).

In conclusion, previous research on identity styles and well-being has mainly relied on indices of adaptive and maladaptive behaviours, and on negative indices of well-being. These seem to be only fragments of what Erikson described as characteristics of being well. We here suggest that the model of psychological well-being suggested by Ryff (1989) may prove useful in this respect.

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Starting from the conviction that "positive health is more than the absence of illness" (Ryff & Singer, 1998, p. 1), Ryff (1989) suggested that psychological well-being comprises what one needs to be psychologically well (contrast the notion of subjective well-being, which

refers to feeling well), which is highly parallel to the characteristics of a healthy personality set forth by Erikson. In order to define the criteria of psychological well-being, Ryff reviewed the works of Maslow on self-actualisation, of Rogers on the fully functioning person, of Jung on individuation, of Allport on maturity, of Erikson on his psychosocial model, of Buhler on the basic life tendencies, of Neugarten on personality change in adulthood, and of Jahoda on the positive criteria of mental health (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1996). Ryff (1989) concluded that they all converge in the following criteria: holding a positive opinion about oneself (self-acceptance), being able to choose or create contexts appropriate for one's psychological condition (environmental mastery), having warm and trusting relationships and being able to love (positive relations with others), having goals, intentions, and a sense of direction (purpose in life), continuous development of one's potential (personal growth), and being self-determined and independent (autonomy).

These criteria are related positively to positive functioning (such as life satisfaction), and negatively to negative functioning (such as depression; Ryff & Singer, 1996). Finally, they are also related to biological health (Ryff & Singer, 2002).

AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY

Based on previous research presented above and on the link between measures of psychological well-being and of other measures of well-being, it would be reasonable to form a research hypothesis on possible links between identity styles and psychological well-being. However, because of the conceptual difference between the indices of well-being used before and the psychological well-being, we prefer to formulate a research question: Are identity styles related to psychological well-being?

METHOD

MEASURES IDENTITY STYLES

We used the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1992a). This 40-item inventory contains four scales: an information, a normative, and a diffuse/avoidant orientation scale, and an index of the strength of commitment. The psychometric qualities of the original version are satisfactory (Berzonsky, 2003). The Identity Style Inventory was translated into the Hellenic language. Some items were re-formulated to better fit the Hellenic educational system. The internal reliability coefficients (alphas) for the identity style scales in this sample were acceptable (0.63, 0.62, and 0.66, for the information, normative and diffuse/avoidant orientation, respectively), but lower than the ones reported for the original version (Berzonsky, 1992a).

Eliminating items only slightly improved these coefficients. Therefore, we retained the original

scales. The alpha coefficient for the commitment index was 0.68, acceptable, and comparable to that reported for the original version (Berzonsky, 1992a).

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

We used the Psychological Well-Being scales devised by Ryff (1989). These are six 14-item scales, measuring the psychological well-being dimensions of Ryff's (1989) model: self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, purpose in life, personal growth, and autonomy (for a description of these scales, Table 1). The psychometric qualities of the original

Hellene, Hellenic, and Hellenic Republic are the proper terms for Greek (person), Greek (object), and Greece version are satisfactory (Ryff, 1989). These scales were translated into the Hellenic language. The internal reliability coefficients (alphas) in the present sample ranged from 0.77 to 0.86, and were slightly lower than the ones reported for the original version (Ryff, 1989). Eliminating items only slightly increased these coefficients. Therefore, the original scales were used.

PROCEDURE

The first author approached the participants in their faculties, informed them about the study, and asked them to fill in a battery consisting of a sheet on demographic characteristics, the two aforementioned questionnaires, and a personality questionnaire. The order of the questionnaires in the battery was randomised. The participants were free to choose whether to fill in the battery immediately, or take it at home and return it to the researcher later.

RESULTS

This is the first time that the Identity Style Inventory and the Psychological Well-Being scales were used in the Hellenic language. Therefore, we first present some preliminary analyses to compare the behaviour of the Hellenic to the original versions of the questionnaires.

Are Identity Styles Related to Psychological Well-Being?

The research question of this study is whether identity styles are related to psychological well-being; in other words, whether identity styles are significant predictors of psychological well-being, in the statistical sense.

Because the psychological well-being scales correlated with each other, a multivariate GLM analysis was conducted. This gave the same results as a series of univariate regression analyses (simultaneous regression of each psychological well-being scale on the identity style and strength of commitment

scales). For reasons of ease of interpretability, only the latter analyses will be presented. To account for the increase in the risk of a type I error, due to conducting multiple analyses, we used a significance cut-off level of 0.01.

Although our research question refers to the identity styles only, the strength of commitment was also included in the analyses. On a conceptual level, information and normative orientations are related to having commitments (high score in strength of commitment), while the diffuse/avoidant orientation is related with not having commitments (low score in strength of commitment). Strength of commitment, on the other hand, significantly correlated with all psychological well-being scales (see Preliminary analyses-Interco relations). Accordingly, it may be that information and normative orientation are positively related to psychological well-being because they lead to making commitments, and that the diffuse/avoidant orientation is negatively related to psychological well-being because it results in lack of commitments. Including the strength of commitment in the analyses secured that such effects would be controlled for.

A series of hierarchical regression analyses was conducted to check whether information and normative orientations were not significant predictors in the rest of the psychological well-being scales because of shared variance in prediction. Each of the psychological well-being scales (except for the personal growth) has been hierarchically regressed first on the diffuse/avoidant orientation and the strength of commitment, and then on all three identity styles and strength of commitment. The R² values of the two models were compared.

CONCLUSION- DISCUSSION

Previous research has related identity styles with separate indices of well-being. This is the first study that related them with an integrated model of positive mental health. The diffuse/avoidant orientation was a significant predictor of the scores in four psychological well-being scales, and the information and norm orientations were significant predictors of the scores in only one psychological well-being scale. The strength of commitment was a significant predictor in all psychological well-being scales but one, and none of the identity styles was a significant predictor of that scale either. Thus, it appears that not dealing with identity issues is related to less psychological well-being, that dealing with identity issues (resulting in commitments) is related to more psychological well-being, but that the way individuals deal with identity issues is not related to psychological well-being.

As we described in the introduction, previous research relates diffuse/avoidant orientation with low

well-being, and information orientation with high well-being. Norm orientation is related both positively and negatively with different facets of well-being. In this study, only the negative connection between diffuse/avoidant orientation and psychological well-being was replicated. Why may this be the case? In previous research, the role of commitment was not taken into account. As Berzonsky (2003) showed, however, commitment does matter when it comes to the relationship between identity styles and well-being.

Some insight on the way it matters can be gained through the literature on identity statuses and well-being. The concept of commitment is inherent in the identity statuses, giving them a comparative advantage over identity styles. Reviewing relevant literature, Meeus (1996) and Meeus et al. (1999) concluded that achievers and foreclosures have the highest well-being, moratoriums have the lowest, and diffusions lie in between (also, Waterman, 1999). The fact that achievers and foreclosures are the highest in well-being signifies that, at least in terms of well-being, it is more preferable to have (than not to have) identity commitments, no matter how these were reached.

In the Results section, we suggested that one possible way through which the diffuse/avoidant orientation is negatively related to well-being is that the former leads to a lack of commitments, which is related to low well-being. This would mean that in hierarchical regression analyses, in which each of the psychological well-being scales would be first regressed on the identity style scales and then on the identity styles and strength of commitment scales, the diffuse/avoidant orientation would be a significant predictor of the psychological well-being scale only in step 1. This was true only for the self-acceptance scale. Diffuse/avoidant orientation predicted the scores in four psychological well-being scales beyond its effect on lacking commitments. According to the conceptualisation of this orientation (Berzonsky, 1990), it refers, among other things, to decisional and behavioural procrastination, which have been related to low well-being (Ferrari, 1991).

Two psychological well-being scales (namely, personal growth and autonomy) had distinct profiles in terms of identity styles. All three identity styles were significant predictors of scores in personal growth: The higher the score in the information orientation and the lower the scores in the normative and diffuse/avoidant orientations, the higher the score in personal growth. A high score in personal growth represents realising that one has the potential of continuous development and improvement over time (Table 1). This is possibly related to active decision-making (information orientation). On the other hand, relying on norms set forth by others (normative orientation) or not facing problems (diffuse/avoidant orientation) exhibits a rather passive perspective on development. That is, the identity styles reflect different perspectives towards one's potential for continuous development. Therefore,

it is reasonable that they were all significant predictors of personal growth.

None of the identity styles or the strength of commitment were significant predictors of autonomy. That is, autonomy seems to be unrelated to both the process and the outcome of making commitments. As one can see in Table 4, however, the diffuse/avoidant orientation and the strength of commitment together did predict autonomy. This is concealed when inspecting the beta values of the individual variables. That is, it appears that the diffuse/avoidant orientation and the strength of commitment have shared variance in the prediction of autonomy. Therefore, inspecting the beta values of each identity style separately exhibits that none of them significantly predicts autonomy.

Some weak points of this study should be kept in mind before generalising these findings. First, the scores in some of the psychological well-being scales significantly differed between men and women. However, due to the small number of men in our sample, it was not feasible to test whether the observed relations with identity styles hold similarly in both genders (repeating the analyses in the female sample gave roughly the same results). A second limitation concerns the satisfactory but rather low internal reliability of the identity style scales. This is not a peculiarity of the Hellenic version, though; it appears that, in several studies (Berzonsky, 1992b; Clancy Dollinger, 1995), the alpha coefficients of the Identity Style Inventory are rather low. This points to problems in the operationalization of the identity styles. Finally, heretofore, we implied that psychological well-being is the outcome variable. This is in line with previous research (Berzonsky, 2003; Nurmi, et al., 1997), but alternative causal relations are also plausible.

Despite these weaknesses, there are also some strong points that support the validity of this study. This paper represents a first attempt to translate and use the Identity Style Inventory and the Psychological Well-Being scales in the Hellenic language. Some preliminary analyses on the intercorrelations between the identity style, strength of commitment, and psychological well-being scales, as well as on age and gender differences in the aforementioned scales showed that these new versions behave satisfactorily. The size of the sample was adequate to test the regression models, given the number of variables included. The instruments used were carefully selected and adapted in the Hellenic language. Particular attention was paid when collecting the data, so that most inventories were fully completed. Finally, the data collected do not violate the assumptions of regression analysis (as presented in Miles & Shevlin, 2001).

In conclusion, when identity issues are approached, it makes no difference in terms of psychological

well-being whether individuals seek answers themselves or adopt norms. Does this mean that we should deny the usefulness of identity styles as a whole? We are going to discuss three points with reference to this question. For a start, it may be that identity styles do not appropriately capture the social-cognitive strategies used by Hellenes, since the Hellenic culture is much more traditional in terms of values than western European countries. For instance, the information orientation question "I've spent a good deal of time reading and talking to others about religious ideas" of the Identity Style Inventory (Berzonsky, 1992a) may be inapplicable in a country, where formal education includes a compulsory course on orthodox Christianity. On the other hand, there is evidence (e.g., Phillips & Pittman, 2004) that, in the American society as well, there is no link between identity styles and well-being.

Secondly, it may be useful to consider the operationalisation of the identity styles. As we already mentioned, the Identity Style Inventory suffers from low internal reliability. Furthermore, as Berzonsky (2002) himself asserts, his identity styles cannot be fully assessed by one single measure. Moreover, the Identity Style Inventory measures the extent to which individuals reportedly use the identity styles (see Berzonsky, 1992c), and not the extent to which they actually use them. Finally, many identity style items refer to the way of having dealt with identity issues, rather than of currently dealing with them (for the meaning of the present perfect tense, see Kirsznier & Mandell, 2002). An alternative means of identity style measurement is the Current Identity Q-sort (Kerpelman, Pittman, Lamke, & Sollie, 2003), in which items are formed in the present term.

Lastly, it may be that identity styles are important for the psychological well-being in a different context. Literature (Berzonsky & Ferrari, 1996; Grotevant, 1987; Kunnen & Bosma, 2000; Magai & Hunziker, 1994) suggests that conflicts between identity and environmental input are causally related to identity change. Berzonsky (1992c) assumes that successful adaptation involves a balance between assimilative and accommodative processes that aim at reducing such conflicts. In the long run, he suggests, "information-based decisions will maximize adaptation" (Berzonsky, 1992c, p. 194). That is, identity styles may be relevant to psychological well-being in cases where individuals are exposed to environments that challenge their identities.

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